

Hard Decisions for New Orleans

It would be nice to believe that New Orleans could be made whole, exactly as it was before Hurricane Katrina devastated it. But that kind of wishful thinking, apparently prevalent among some New Orleanians and encouraged by some city leaders, will only stymie the reconstruction process. The nation cannot rebuild everywhere in New Orleans, nor should it.

The city's rebuilding commission took an important step this week when it recommended that only the areas that could muster sufficient population should be rebuilt. Not surprisingly, that announcement drew the ire of residents of some neighborhoods where generations have lived on the same plots of land. While that is an ideal that should be protected wherever possible, it cannot define the rebuilding process.

The lowest-lying, hardest-hit areas, like parts of New Orleans East, the Lower Ninth Ward and Lakeview, are also the most vulnerable to future hurricanes and flooding. Some of the blocks farthest below sea level should be turned into parks to allow better drainage, as recommended by the Urban Land Institute, a nonprofit research group — even though that will be difficult to say to the residents of those areas.

Even with a commitment from Washington to build optimal protection against the fiercest Category 5 storms — which hasn't happened yet — the work would take years to complete. Residents

should not be encouraged to gamble with their insurance checks for political or emotional reasons.

It is not a coincidence that many of those hard-hit, low-lying areas have had poor and predominantly African-American residents. That injustice needs to be corrected, not recreated. Whether owners or renters, the people from less-protected areas should be compensated so they have enough money to live somewhere else in town. The answer is not to thrust people back into harm's way, especially when it's unclear how much hurricane protection the city will really have in the coming years.

Rosy predictions do not help the city's most vulnerable displaced residents. The city government has to be straight with its constituents. For the foreseeable future, New Orleans will be a smaller city with a smaller population and a smaller tax base. If local leaders proffer unrealistic solutions, they will only strengthen the hand of those opposed to a real rebuilding commitment for New Orleans.

President Bush sounded out of touch as usual this week when he called the still-ravaged city "a heck of a place to bring your family." Rather than conjuring up memories of Michael Brown, the erstwhile head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Mr. Bush could better spend his time increasing the pressure on Congress to act on some version of Representative Richard Baker's federal buyout legislation. Lawmakers in Washington should take up the bill.